

New consumer chief

Huntsman's choice faces little opposition

By Dave Anderton

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Gov. Jon Huntsman Jr. on Monday announced that he has appointed Michele Beck, a resource planning analyst at Xcel Energy, as the new director of the Utah Committee of Consumer Services.

Beck, 38, was one of two finalists competing for the job after Huntsman in September rejected four previous candidates. The position has been vacant since March, when former director Leslie Reberg stepped down.

Beck, who resides in Minnesota, also has worked as a consumer advocate for the Minnesota Department of Commerce and as a rate regulation analyst for an electric cooperative.

She must still be confirmed by a majority vote of the six-member consumer committee, which is expected to discuss the matter on Nov. 14.

Beck's responsibilities at Xcel included electricity forecast planning. Most recently she worked on a proposal for an additional 375-megawatt base load resource that involves wind and hydro power.

Beck said she did not have any involvement in nuclear projects at Xcel, including the company's efforts to ship nuclear waste to Skull Valley, about 50 miles from Salt Lake City. The Star Tribune, a daily newspaper in Minneapolis, reported earlier this year that Xcel spent \$23 million on efforts to ship its nuclear waste to Utah.

"My true personal opinion is that no company should pursue nuclear power unless there is a solution for the waste," Beck said. "I guarantee you that if the situation was reversed, Minnesotans would have gone crazy."

Beck added that when she began working at the Minnesota Department of Commerce, there was a push to move its spent nuclear fuel storage out of state.

"I had to actively avoid working on that, too," Beck said. "I have had no involvement in any nuclear projects at all."

Huntsman praised Beck's professional background in a prepared statement, saying he was "fully confident she will make an excellent director."

Francine Giani, executive director of the Utah Department of Commerce, said Beck has met with the governor.

"He was extremely impressed with her and her enthusiasm," Giani said. "She has that right combination that makes what she walks into be very easy. She's comfortable with the issues. She's familiar with them. She understands them."

Dee Jay Hammon, chairman of the consumer committee, said he is looking forward to bringing Beck's name before the full committee for a vote.

It appears Beck's confirmation will be a smooth process, unlike that of Reberg, who was nearly rejected in her confirmation vote because of her previous employment as a community relations manager at US WEST.

Claire Geddes, a member of the search committee that recommended Beck,

said she will not oppose Beck, as she did Reberg.

"(Beck) has got a very strong background in utility regulation," Geddes said. "She has more experience than anyone else. She has the background, and she has the education. That end of it is very strong. I'm hoping that she will be as strong an advocate."

In 2005, Minnesota had the ninth-lowest average residential natural gas prices in the nation, according to the Energy Information Administration. That same year, Minnesota's electricity rates ranked No. 21 in lowest average retail prices. In comparison, Utah residential natural gas prices in 2005 were second lowest in the nation, with electricity prices ranking 12th lowest.

"I have no connection to utilities that operate in Utah," Beck said. "I would ask that people judge me for who I am, that they give me a chance. Certainly some people who come from the utility are going to always be naturally inclined to side with the utility. That's not the case with me."

The Committee of Consumer Services was created by the Utah Legislature in 1977 and is charged with protecting the interests of consumers and small businesses in utility rate cases.

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